

HIGH COUNTRY NEWS

I can't wait to drink wastewater

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I'm not really a water connoisseur. I can't tell the difference between bottled "mountain spring" water and ordinary tap water, and all the various brands of bottled water taste alike to me. There is, however, one kind of water I'm just longing to sip. Unfortunately, it's not yet on the market, but I'm hoping it will be eventually. It's San Diego sewage water -- recycled, of course.

Why do I find the prospect of drinking recycled sewage exciting? Out of civic pride, you might say. Colorado River water is partly recycled wastewater, after all, and if it comes to a choice, as a loyal San Diegan, I prefer our sewage to the Las Vegas product any day. Why drink wastewater from other towns when you can drink your own?

Civic pride aside, what's officially called "indirect potable reuse" -- a vague term better known as toilet-to-tap -- has all kinds of attractive advantages. Sewage purification is cheaper than desalination; although the process is extremely similar, sewage purification requires less energy, since the pressure needed in the reverse osmosis step is considerably less than that for ocean desalination. It's easier on the environment than desalination, because not only does it avoid the problem of inadvertently killing fish and fish larvae in the intake, but it also reduces the amount of treated effluent discharged into the ocean or nearby rivers. In fact, there are all kinds of reasons to love indirect potable reuse: It's cleaner, it's greener and other counties do it, too.

That's why I continue to be astonished at the public debate over toilet-to-tap, both here in San Diego and elsewhere. I'm not surprised that people have concerns. What surprises me is the number of politicians and other influential public figures who perpetrate myths about toilet-to-tap -- especially those who ought to know better.

Only two years ago, San Diego's city council had to override the mayor's veto to approve a study of toilet to tap. The study would be the first step towards a full-scale project to augment drinking supplies by adding purified wastewater to a city reservoir. But like other San Diego water recycling projects in the past, it has sparked controversy, and support remains tenuous at best. Earlier this summer, city council member Sherri Lightner nearly stalled the project, asking the council to reconsider a key contract she'd earlier voted to approve, citing concern for public safety and taxpayer dollars. Her effort failed, but only because councilman Kevin Faulconer, an opponent of sewage recycling, believed that in spite of his own objections, the city should not renege on a contract. He cast his vote to keep the study and rescued it again -- at least for now.

As this latest little contretemps demonstrates, it's still possible that San Diego's latest sewage purification project could perish as others have in the past, another casualty of the wonderfully irrational debate about water in the West.

Of course, we want to make sure our drinking water is safe. And, of course, the merits of any particular project are fair game for debate. But to raise doubts about the safety of the technology is misguided -- plain and simple. There are a number of other cities and counties, both in the United States and abroad, that have purified sewage for drinking water, and they've been doing so for years.

I have spoken with scientists, engineers and public officials with multiple water agencies that purify sewage for drinking water or are considering doing so; I have toured the plant in Orange County that recycles some 70 million gallons of water a day, and for my part, I have no doubt that, if properly implemented, the technology is unquestionably safe. Even if I did have any qualms, there is one unanswerable argument that overrides any objections: Like it or not, we drink recycled sewage anyway.

That's why I'm glad that Sherri Lightner's attempt to derail the pilot project seems to have failed; that's why I hope that similar efforts to obstruct water recycling will meet with a similar fate. This issue is too important to become just another political football. Recycled wastewater offers us an innovative new source of clean water.

It's not the solution to the West's water crisis, because there is no one single solution to the West's water crisis. It's just an excellent place to start. What happens in Vegas can stay in Vegas; I'm ready to start drinking my hometown sewage instead. Right now, there's nothing I'd like more than a cool fresh glass of recycled San Diego sewer water.